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ABSTRACT

How people organize sensory data is influenced not only by their role as actor observer; the extent of their empathy for other actors; and the vividness, availability, representativeness, and negative impact of the data; but also by the culture from which it springs. To determine how the attributions people make are affected by culture, which can be viewed as fixed expectations determining responses or rough guidelines helping people to interpret experience, a tape recording of a 5-minute conversation was played for nine subjects. Subjects were then asked what information they used, or what additional information they would need, to interpret the conversation. Analysis of the interviews suggested that evaluations were influenced by an ideal of social conversation that included requirements for topical continuity and commitment to maintain involvement in the conversation. In another perceptual organization task, 28 respondents were shown transcripts of the conversation and asked to draw conclusions about such things as the gender of the speakers and conversational motivations. Although the respondents were consistent in seeing one of the conversants as controlling the talk, they varied widely in their judgment of the gender of the speakers and the number of conversational exchanges. Approaching culture as a cognitive construct appears useful both in understanding culture as it exists in communication and in the interpretation of communication. (MM)

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CULTURE AND THE ATTRIBUTION PROCESS:

TECHNIQUES FOR TAPPING THE COGNITIVE BASES OF CULTURE

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Culture and the Attribution Process:

Techniques for Tapping the Cognitive Bases of Culture

The conceptual perspective offered by attribution theory holds considerable promise for intercultural communication research. It provides a framework for examining both the process in which persons organize and interpret their communicative exchanges, and for examining the relationship of this process to the manifest aspects of communicative interaction. Attribution theory provides an explanatory framework for the manner in which persons make sense of their social world; it begins at the point at which sensory data are first perceptually organized and defined as information and proceeds through the inferential procedures by which the social significance of that information is determined. My purpose in this paper is to present a view of culture consistent with the assumptions of attribution theory in order to investigate the operation of culture in the attribution process. Further, I propose a series of research techniques for triangulating the cognitive based of culture as they mediate the attribution process.

The paper is developed in three sections. The first provides a brief overview of Heider's (1958) view of the attribution process and indicates major findings of attribution research significant to the study of culture. The second section provides two conceptual definitions of culture as a cognitive construct, which makes its study from the perspective of attribution feasible. Finally, I discuss a series of techniques for examining the mediation of culture upon the attribution process. Preliminary data are also presented.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory attempts to explain how persons organize the stream of sensory data they receive from their environment into meaningful units of information about events, actions, and persons; these units are the evidential basis for judgments of social significance and for personal action. In communicative interaction, the attribution process enables the individual to organize the continuous stream of physical and verbal behavior into meaningful units which provide the basis for social inference and for decisions about extending the communicative interaction. As Heider (1958) points out, attribution is most often instantaneous. We perceive, organize, and interpret in one fluid moment.

The principles of attribution have been extensively discussed (see Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Winer, 1972). They have been examined in terms of their implications for intercultural communication (Ehrenhaus, 1982) and as the basis for examining interpersonal communication processes (see Berger, 1975; Berger & Bradac, 1983; Clatterbuck, 1979). Of concern for the argument I develop in this paper are the following:

1. Actors and observers tend to demonstrate regular and reliable differences in the nature of their causal attributions (Jones & Nisbett, 1972).

2. While there is evidence to indicate that actors tend towards situational explanations of their own behavior and observers tend towards dispositional explanations of actors' behavior, a wide variety of circumstances reverse that direction (see Monson & Snyder, 1977, for a major review).

3. Observers can bring their attributions about actors' behavior closer to the actors' self-attributions by empathizing (Regan & Totten, 1975).

4. Attributors vary in their perceptual organization of ongoing behavior; this variable unitizing influence subsequent inference-making (Newtson, 1973; 1976).

5. Attributors are rational, but cease their attributional searches once reasonable and relevant explanations for the event in question are found (Taylor & Fiske, 1978).

6. In pursuit of a reasonable and relevant explanation, an attributor may take several "inferential shortcuts":
   - -Salience: information that is vivid and distinctive is seen as significant to the explanation (Taylor & Fiske, 1975; 1978)
   - -Availability: information that is readily recalled pertaining to the issue at hand may be incorporated in the explanation (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974)
   - -Representativeness: information bearing superficial resemblances to information found useful in the past will be used (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974)
   - -Negativity: information deemed negative will be over-represented in the evaluation (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972).

7. Attributors will conduct their attributional search based upon their expectations for the event/action in question. Their expectations will influence what they attend to, how they organize the information, and what they recall (Zadny & Gerard, 1974).

The image we have of the human as attributor is of an individual who attempts to find reasonable and relevant explanations of the events and actions s/he encounters. This search for information is biased by a number of factors. The information base available to observers differs from that available to the actor being observed. The manner in which the ongoing flow of action is organized into discrete units influences the information value of those units, and what inferences may be drawn from them; the individual's expectations for the event/action will mediate that perceptual process. The use of information identified by the individual is also subject to error or bias. Vivid, or distinctive features become important. Recall plays a role in constructing an explanation. Superficial information may suggest the legitimacy of inferring a broad range of other information. And negative information is likely to be evaluated as more significant than it should be.

The role of culture in this process is likely to be significant. We may presume that culture has something to do with what people expect to happen, and

how they expect it to happen. Living within a culture is instructive. Persons come to learn that in circumstance A, it is safe to presume x, y, and z. As long as all members of the culture work with the same presuppositions about x, y, and z in circumstance A, then social life will function efficiently. Human attribution processes concern the activity of sense-making; culture prescribes what is sensible. Together, culture directs sense-making in a particular style which is effective. It enables persons to safely take "inferential shortcuts." The process of attribution would be terribly awkward, and social life would be drastically impeded if each experience and interaction were encountered anew, strange and dissimilar to all others. Culture provides those rules for what we may safely assume, when we may make those assumptions, and it also indicates how we should attempt to develop reasonable explanations of events when we may not safely engage in attribution in automatic fashion.

Culture as a Cognitive Construct

The view of culture we must take if we are to work from the perspective of attribution theory is a cognitive one. This approach to culture is consistent with the school of cognitive anthropology, as first articulated by Goodenough (1957). Cognitive anthropology is concerned with discovering the conceptual models persons use. "It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them. . . ." (Goodenough, cited in Sturtevant, 1968, p. 476). Researchers "should strive to define objects according to the conceptual system of the people (they are) studying" (Frake, 1968, p. 507). "The principles by which people in a culture construe their world reveal how they segregate the pertinent from the insignificant, how they code and retrieve information, how they anticipate events, how they define alternative courses of action and make decisions among them (Goodenough, cited in Frake, 1968, pp. 513-514).

Culture is to be dicovered, then, in the structuring principles persons use to guide the process of attribution. These principles are to be found in the structure we give to our expectations for events and actions. "Based on one's experience of the world in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences" (Tannen,1979, pp. 137-138).

Culture acquires definition in terms of these structures we give to our expectations. Two definitions are possible, enabling us to examine both the relatively stable and invariate "frames" culture places upon expectations, and the relatively more probabilistic guidelines for interpretive procedures culture teaches when its members actively engage in attribution-making to reduce uncertainty.

First, we may view culture as a series of structured expectations for making action and language use routine (Freedle, 1979). These expectations--stable, stereotyped vignettes--enable fluid action. As Schank & Abelson (1977) indicate with their concept of "script," there are a specified series of actions one must engage in to accomplish some task. This stable, idealized script provides the basis for acting and for interpreting the correctness of all the actors' involvement. Consider what one must know to order a Big Mac: approach counter, name desired products, pay, wait for food, get food, leave counter. Our script does not include (and implicitly excludes) mulling over the menu, being asked to approach the counter, asking "How's the beef today? Is it fresh?", and a host of others. Thus, reading situations properly--determining the proper structuring principle for participating in and interpreting interaction--is a matter of knowing what are the significant features of the event/action for making attributions.

We can also view culture more flexibly, as "a set of interactive schemata for habitual ways in which interacting individuals can dynamically discover what each person intends to convey given the immediate context and shared presuppositions" (Freedle, 1979, xiii, emphasis added). In this view, culture is a collection of expectations by which we construct, test, and modify our interpretations of the discourse and of the other's purposes as inferred through the discourse. Culture need not be viewed as a fixed, invariate set of expectations imposed upon interaction. Rather, "culture provides principles for framing experience as eventful in particular ways. . . ." (Frake, 1977, pp. 6-7). Culture does not impose a cognitive map upon persons, but provides them with a set of principles for reducing their uncertainty. As Frake (1977) notes, "Different cultures are like different schools of navigation designed to cope with different terrains and seas" (p.7).

Both of these views of culture provide workable bases for learning about the relationship of culture to the attribution process. The former view directs our questions to those aspects of attribution concerned with identifying stable structures of expectations. What features of an encounter cue a particular structure of expectation? What features of the interaction within that particular structure are attributionally salient for judging the progress of the interaction? The training persons receive by living within a particular type of culture predisposes them to particular attributional biases (Ehrenhaus, 1983). Cultures that are relatively more High Context (Hall, 1977) require their members to attend more to subtleties of the situation than do Low Context cultures. Low Context cultures are more likely to produce attributional skills biased to seek out personal disposition information as the basis for explaining action. The latter view of culture directs our attention to the puzzle-solving skills reflecting the

culture that reveal themselves in an attributional search. What kinds of information persons seek to reduce uncertainty, and how they hierarchically arrange their search, provide insight into the culture's mediating effect upon the attribution process. We can, in other words, examine how culture mediates the dynamics of discovery, from the manner in which sensory data are organized into meaningful units through the inferential shortcuts taken to find a reasonable explanation that obviates the uncertainty.

Techniques for Examining the Cognitive Bases of Culture

Every research technique has certain limitations. Methodological triangulation overcomes this limitation by relying on diverse strategies--each with distinctive strengths and weaknesses--that complement each other. The result of triangulation is an understanding of a topic both more reliable and valid that that obtainable by any one technique (Denzin, 1970).

I am proposing primarily the use of methodological triangulation, and secondarily, the use of theory triangulation (Denzin, 1970, p. 301). The former type concerns data collection and analysis. The latter concerns the use of different assumptive grounds to examine the same phenomenon. I have presented two related, but different, definitions of culture as a cognitive construct. In one view, culture is a stable set of structured expectations which make routine the interpretation of social life. In the other view, culture is a set of rough, interpretive guidelines for the process of uncertainty reduction. At some point, after sufficient descriptive data are collected, the two views should be assessed for their utility; the best test of their utility is in a direct comparison of their explanatory and predictive power (Zelditch, 1970).

The research techniques I am proposing for investigating culture in the attribution process are information-seeking interviews and information-giving interviews, both of which will produce largely qualitative data, and large sample

studies which can yield quantitative data for analysis. There are four phases to the triangulation.

The first technique examines the more stable aspects of expectations by seeking out those expectations in narrative explanations given by persons of the culture of interest. These data would be gathered in individual information-seeking interviews. According to Labov (1972), a linguistic analysis of narrative syntax provides evidence of the narrator's categorization and organization of experience. Certain issues are addressed, others omitted, and the grammatical arrangement of those addressed issues indicate their relative importance for the narrator. Tannen (1979) builds upon Labov's analytic scheme and treats explanations as manifest indicators of the narrator's underlying expectations; these expectations are culturally based. Various verbal elements suggest the speaker's point of the narrative. Narrative answers the question, "So what?" in advance.

Tannen(1979) conducted a study in which she examined narrative explanations for their culturally based expectations. She had persons view a brief silent film, after which they gave their narratives. The film showed a series of actions: a man picking pears and placing them in baskets, a boy on a bicycle stealing a basket, the boy's accident in the presence of a girl as he races from the scene of the crime, his rescue by other boys, his rewarding his rescuers with the pears, and their observation by the man who picked the pears as they eat their reward. The film was shown in Athens to Greeks and in the U.S. to Americans. Tannen found that the two groups had diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations revealed through their narratives. Some of these differences were moral judgments, the inclusion or deletion of information in the film, and the manufacturing of novel elements to fit their narratives. These narratives

indicated subjects' expectations for what events could occur, how and why they occurred, and what motives guided the characters.

A second technique, related to the first, is to provide respondents the opportunity to engage in an attributional search subsequent to providing a narrative explanation. The material upon which any narrative is based is never without some facets of uncertainty. By allowing respondents to ask questions about the material upon which the narrative was based, we can begin to acquire insight into the more flexible "puzzle-solving" view of culture. Through these information-giving interviews, the researcher can learn what the respondents view as attributionally salient information that was lacking in the original stimulus material. The order in which they ask provides information about how that search is hierarchically arranged.

A third technique, and part of the information-seeking interview, is to have the respondent indicate, where possible, what features of the stimulus material provided the evidential basis for inferences. They can indicate what precise features--whether substantive or stylistic--cued a particular mode of intepretation or a particular judgment.

Finally, using large scale techniques for collecting self-report data, respondents can perform the task of perceptually organizing the stimulus material. This can be accomplished using tape recorders, event recorders, or, if the material is converted to written form, by placing slashes in the storyline at perceived breakpoints. This perceptual organization of the stimulus material can be analyzed for uniformity and for pattern of divisions. Further, respondents can answer a series of questions addressing attributional concerns. Data can be analyzed for the relationship of number of units to certainty of judgment, for the relationship of uniformity of perceptual organization to the uniformity of

judgments, and for respondents' judgments of the causal basis of the conversants' involvement. Additionally, respondents can be asked about the particular salience of various features of the interaction; the data for these questions would come from the interviews.

Preliminary Research

A preliminary study was conducted using a transcript of a five minute conversation. On an individual basis, nine interviews were conducted. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Each respondent was asked to provide a narrative explanation of the conversation. This narrative was tape recorded. With the tape recorder still running, the respondent was asked what information s/he would like to have in order to develop a better understanding of the conversational event. All respondents asked questions. After each respondent asked for information, s/he was asked to comment upon how those pieces of information helped in developing a more secure understanding. In the final stage of the interview, the tape recorder was turned off. Each respondent was reminded of the major points s/he had initially made in the narrative, and was asked to indicate, by referring back to the transcript, what specifically provided the evidence for the respondent's inferences

A related study was conducted using a sample of 28 respondents. These persons were given copies of the transcript and were asked to indicate the conceptual divisions they saw in the conversation. This task concerned the perceptual organization of the conversation. It was accomplished simply by asking the respondents to place a slash mark (/) at the point marking the end of one unit and the beginning of the next. Following this task, they answered a series of questions regarding the conversants' causal involvement in the conversation, the conversants' genders, and how confident they were in their inferences.

Analysis of the interviews provides the basis for some tentative observations. First, certain normative standards for social conversation did appear through the narratives. Virtually all narratives began with a listing of the number of conversants and the topics they discussed. Most went on to emphasize how the conversants felt about the topics, while some stressed the apparently disjointed nature of the conversation; in the latter case, a variety of judgments were rendered about the conversants. It became clear that the conversation was judged, at least in part, in terms of some "ideal type" for social conversation that included requirements for topical continuity, for commitment to maintain involvement in the conversation, and for asking for and giving advice. Discussion of the topics the conversants covered indicated that certain things are appropriate to discuss superficially, while introducing certain other topics that reveal information about the individual's mental stability stretch the bounds of legitimate social conversation. Of the information sought following the narratives, the most prominent item pertained to the motives of the conversants in their discussion and to their apparent lack of motivation to accomplish various academic tasks; while certainly not conclusive, these items both concern personal disposition, the type of explanation Low Context culture members are attributionally predisposed to make. When respondents were asked to link their inferences to the text of the transcript, the common links were to phrasing and analogies that indicated the gender of the conversants, to misinterpretations made by the conversants that indicated their poor listening and lack of concern, and to specific topical references that indicated the conversants were indolent and preoccupied with money and status to the exclusion of more responsible concerns.

The results of the perceptual organization task revealed a wide variation

in the manner in which the ongoing flow of the conversation was interpreted. There was no significant relationship between the frequency of imposing perceptual units (which define information) and the certainty respondents had in their judgments. Respondents were highly consistent in certain of their judgments; they clearly saw one of the conversants as more dispositionally responsible and as exerting more control of conversational tone and topic flow. However, when asked to judge the gender of the conversants, respondents were accurate at levels no better than chance, despite high confidence in their judgments. Apparently, these results suggest that confidence and accuracy of judgment (where accuracy can be objectively assessed) are unrelated to the unitizing process.

Perhaps most apparent in pursuing a cognitive approach to examining the influence of culture in making sense of communication is the time consuming and sometimes tedious nature of the work. Particularly since so much of the data this approach requires are respondent generated, triangulation becomes essential as a safeguard. These techniques have the potential to generate important findings, useful in understanding culture as it exists in communication and in the interpretation of communication. Together, the techniques provide a richness of data simply not available from the perspective of the outside observer.

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